Fictive Kin Among Oldest Old African Americans in the San Francisco Bay Area

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Objectives. The purpose here is to identify those processes that account for the more active and supportive kinship networks among Black oldest old than found among their White age peers.

Methods. Focused interviews were conducted with 122 Blacks 85 years and older. Both open-ended and semistructured questions were asked in order to determine how Blacks defined family and kinship membership, their expectations for kin, and the desired levels of reciprocity.

Findings. A content analysis of the responses indicated that Blacks defined the boundaries of their families flexibly so as to include fictive kin, and they upgraded more distant kin into the status of primary kin. They also emphasized the importance of collateral relatives so as to expand the size of the network.

Discussion. These processes use personal choices as well as immediate needs to expand the basis of relatedness beyond blood and marriage. Thus the supportive capacities of networks increase in order to serve a potentially vulnerable population.

Two seemingly competing views of Black families prevail today. One view identifies the strengths of the family as a multifunctional unit of three or more generations and a large group of extended kin (Martin & Martin, 1978). A second view maintains that today's family is different from its predecessor because of demographic shifts in age structures, policy changes that affect household structure, and contemporary urban forces that undermine family stability (Burton & Dilworth-Anderson, 1991). Perhaps some of these inconsistencies arise because the Black family tends to be viewed through the lens of the dominant White family that in its ideal form emphasizes marriage and the parent-child relationship. In contrast, the organization of the Black family differs in its capacity to enlarge the extended family beyond lineal ties and in the process enlarge its potential supportive resources.

This report analyzes these organizational processes using interview data from 122 Black Americans, 85 years and older, who were part of a research project on adaptation of the oldest old. In comparison to 150 very old Whites in the study, also 85 and older, Blacks have significantly larger kinship networks and receive significantly more support from kin (Johnson & Barer, 1995). This article analyzes two processes that contribute to the expansion in size of the Black extended family. First, the family has flexible definitions of family membership and more elastic boundaries that can potentially expand the numbers to include fictive kin. Second, in an upgrading process, distant kin can be redefined as primary kin and in the process increase the numbers of close relationships. In a third process reported elsewhere, the solidarity of siblings is also emphasized in the Black families studied here, a factor that potentially expands the numbers of collateral kin (Johnson & Barer, 1995).

This article identifies the characteristics of those who are most likely to have fictive kin relationships. Then by exploring how respondents define their kinship relationships, “the grammar of kinship” emerges. These are the procedural guidelines respondents used to determine membership in their family. This determination is part of what Gubrium and Buckhoff (1982) identified as “native talk” about how relationships are defined and how mutual expectations are determined. Stack and Burton (1993) developed a similar framework in their concept of “kinscripts” to represent the interplay among family ideology, norms, and behaviors.

BACKGROUND

Race and ethnicity are usually taken-for-granted sources of family diversity, with the assumption being that minorities and immigrant groups have closer extended families. Until recently, Blacks, who have been studied more than most ethnic groups, are particularly noted for their greater family solidarity when compared with Whites. Contrary to common assumptions, however, three national representative data sets find that Whites see more of kin and exchange more assistance than do Blacks (Cooney & Uhlenberg, 1992; Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1991; Eggebeen, 1992; Hogan, Eggebeen, & Clogg, 1993; Hoyert, 1991). In an analysis of the 1987 National Survey of Families and Households, Roschelle (1997) attributed these changes to current problems in urban areas that may undermine the support capacities of kinship networks. Likewise, Hogan, Eggebeen, and Clogg (1993) reported that Blacks consistently have lower rates of exchanges between generations than Whites, because they simply have fewer resources and hence have less to exchange with each other.

One of the prominent changes in the Black family in recent years is the declining numbers of extended family households (Sudarkasa, 1997). Also among the recent family changes are the increased numbers of young single mothers who are living in one-parent households rather than with their families (Taylor, Chatters, & Jayakody, 1997). Black single mothers are less...
likely to receive money from their families than their White counterparts (Hofferth, 1984). Although these young single mothers usually lived near their families, family supports to young mothers were found to diminish as they reached their mid-20s (Hogan, Hao, & Parish, 1990). Jayakody, Chatters, and Taylor (1993) suggested that the practical assistance to single mothers may be overstated. They found that less than 25% of the families provided financial support and less than 20% of single mothers received help with child care, but over 80% reported emotional support from their families. In contrast to recent surveys, ethnographic studies from the 1970s reported strong solidarity of Black families, patterns that persisted as Blacks left the rural South for northern cities (Aschenbrenner, 1973; Martin & Martin, 1978; Stack, 1974). More recent surveys may be presenting a more realistic picture of the capacity of the Black family because of family changes in the intervening 25 years (Taylor et al., 1997).

Nevertheless, the lower level of family supports to younger Blacks is not as evident among older Blacks. Older Blacks are more likely than Whites to live with other relatives in extended family households (Beck & Beck, 1989; Soldo, Wolf, & Agree, 1990). A longitudinal study of the extended families of middle-aged women found that one half of all Black women lived in three generation households at some point between 1969 and 1984 (Beck & Beck, 1989). Older Black parents also have higher filial expectations than Whites and receive more assistance from their children (Lee, Peek, & Coward, 1998). Research on older inner-city Black families finds that Blacks have more active informal support networks than inner-city Whites and are more satisfied with these relationships (Johnson & Barer, 1990). Older Black women also receive more help from their families than White women (Silverstein & Waite, 1993), and family caregivers experience less burden than White caregivers (Fredman, Daly, & Lazar, 1995; Mui, 1992). Older Blacks also give and receive more aid from siblings and other collateral relatives than White elderly (Johnson & Barer, 1995).

Thus, the Black extended family in later life is notable for its strong bonds of attachment and higher levels of interactions among its members than Whites (Taylor & Chatters, 1991). Noncomparative studies stress the importance of children to older Blacks (Chatters, 1990; George, 1988; Gibson, 1982; Mutran, 1985; Taylor, 1985). Caregiving strain on their children does not seem to result in a poorer quality of parent–child relationships (Chatters, Taylor, & Neighbors, 1989; Taylor & Chatters, 1991), perhaps because caregivers have a larger pool of extended kin available to share the burdens of care (Smerglia, Deimling, & Barresi, 1989). Chatters, Taylor, and Jackson (1985, 1986) found that distant relatives and friends are important in Black support networks. In addition, church members are a major source of support (Taylor & Chatters, 1988), and church participation has a positive effect on the quality of family life (Ellison, 1997). Happiness or subjective well-being among Blacks is more strongly associated with closeness to family rather than to friends (Ellison, 1990).

Fictive and Upgraded Kin

In anthropology, Schneider’s (1968) analysis of basic symbols of the American kinship system identified two bases of relationships: those established by blood ties or what he terms biogenetic substance and those by marriage or the order of law. With the rise of alternative family forms and the presence of fictive kin in some ethnic groups, such a simple dichotomy between blood and marriage as a basis of kinship has come to be viewed as too limited. For example, a semiotic analysis of kinship reorganization after divorce and remarriage found that relationships continued with former in-laws on the basis of sharing a biological tie to the children of the former marriage (Johnson, 1989a; 1989b; Johnson & Barer, 1987). Also as kinship networks expanded with remarriage, personal choices commonly determined whether relationships continued or ceased. Such chosen kin or constructed kin also occur in gay and lesbian unions (Allen & Demo, 1995; Weston, 1991) and among older people who are without family (Rubinstein, Alexander, Goodman, & Luborsky, 1991). Further evidence of limitations of Schneider’s (1968) propositions comes from the intermittent reports on fictive kin among Blacks who tend to dismiss or downplay connections solely through blood and marriage.

Fictive kin are usually defined as those people to whom one considers to be related but who are not related by blood or marriage (Chatters, Taylor, & Jayakody, 1994). The most comprehensive review of this literature on fictive kin among Black Americans comes from Chatters and her colleagues. They point to peer-based fictive kin networks, such as street-corner groups (Liebow, 1967) as well as those relationships incorporated into extended families. In their national survey of Blacks, 45% maintained active fictive kin relationships. While the concept of the Black family, like Whites, is primarily genealogical with lineal relationships being primary kin, a study of a small southern town found that secondary kin include relatives by marriage, fosterage, and adoption (Shimkin, Louie, & Frate, 1978). Likewise, Stack’s (1974) research in the Midwest documents the kin-like helping networks among young Black mothers.

Fictive kin have also been reported among Whites. Up to 40% of Whites in a small Nova Scotia community have fictive kin (MacRae, 1992). Townsend (1957) also observed the frequent occurrence of fictive kin among older people in England, a factor he traces to a process of substitution. Namely, those without a spouse or child or those who have lost most family members are more likely to have fictive kin. Rubinstein and his colleagues (1991) reported on the constructed relatives of childless unmarried women. He challenged Schneider’s (1968) cultural account of American kinship as being too limited, because it is based solely on blood and marriage. Such distinctions infer that relatedness by blood is the most “real” relationship. Nevertheless, those who share a distant blood tie must increasingly rely on a code of conduct. Likewise, when someone says a relationship is “like family” or “like my daughter,” the code of conduct is up for negotiation. In the Rubinstein and colleagues study (1991), those without lineal descendants had several options; they could choose collateral blood ties and concentrate on the aunt role that emphasized relationships with nieces and nephews. Or they could use the code of conduct to create a relationship with someone to whom they were previously unrelated.

Despite the scattered reports on fictive kin among Whites, Chatters and her colleagues (1994) concluded that their occurrence is more common among Blacks. Aschenbrenner (1973) described play relatives in both Chicago and in the South as those friendships outside the family that take on the characteristics of kinship. The process entails the extension of kinship
terms preceded by the word "play," a term she concludes refers to the playful aspect of the relationship. One only plays at being a mother or a daughter to someone outside the family. She notes that these relationships can be broken off at any time, although some can develop into lasting friendships. In such cases, they develop feelings of obligation to each other in what was once a casual relationship. In Aschenbrenner’s Chicago sample, some young Blacks had not heard of the term “play relative,” but instead they used the word “Godmother” or “Godchild” to refer to such relationships.

The problems in investigating fictive kin lie in the absence of a fixed definition of what constitutes such relationships and the lack of consensus about the labels used to refer to them (Chatters et al., 1994). For instance, “quasi-kin” is a term found in research on step relatives. Surprisingly, the literature on friendships never addresses those relationships where friends become fictive kin. This lack of clarity as to the nature of fictive kinship might be best addressed by analyzing “native talk” as informants discuss the nature of these relationships in order to determine a classification of relationships.

Comparisons of Black and White Oldest Old

In previous articles from our longitudinal study of 150 Whites and 122 Blacks, 85 years and older, we reported that most measures of their family integration among extended kin indicated that Blacks were significantly more involved in family life (Johnson, 1994; Johnson, 1995; Johnson & Barer, 1995; Perry & Johnson, 1994). This greater involvement exists despite the fact that 45% are childless, and as many as 51% of the Blacks have at least one deceased child, compared with 32% of the Whites. Although almost half the Blacks are without children, who are typically the major supporter in late life, they had their support needs well met by secondary relatives.

Comparisons of Black and White parents show that there were no significant differences in the amount of instrumental and expressive supports received from children and grandchildren. However, Black parents received significantly more supports from collateral kin (siblings, nieces and nephews, and cousins) than White parents did. These differences by race are even more prominent among the childless (Johnson & Barer, 1995). Three times more Black childless oldest old received instrumental and expressive support from collateral kin than White childless did, and more than twice as many Blacks were in frequent contact with them. Given the high disability in late life, the most important resource for the very old is someone who can step in as a caregiver. More than twice as many Black childless identified a collateral relative as a caregiver. Consequently, siblings, siblings’ children, and other collateral relatives were far more important in the daily lives of Black oldest old. As a result, there were few isolates among them, while one quarter of the White oldest old maintained no face-to-face family relationships.

METHODS

The Sample

The initial objective in a study of the oldest old was to select respondents from public voting records in San Francisco and Oakland, California, and then to use a snowballing technique in which respondents secured from the voting records referred us to their age peers. The voting records include date of birth and usually current addresses to facilitate locating respondents. Because Blacks 85 years and older comprise a small proportion of the local population, it was necessary to also secure additional names from various community associations. In total, 34% came from voting records, 32% were randomly selected from a health clinic that served over 100 Blacks 85 years and older, and 34% were secured through snowball techniques or referrals from community associations. Letters to prospective respondents, 85 years and older, were followed by a telephone call to schedule an interview. Of those contacted who were judged competent enough to be interviewed, 24% refused. Interviewers established competency to participate in an interview by asking potential respondents to confirm their age, date of interview, address, and telephone number.

Data Collection

Interviews lasting 2 to 3 hours were held in the respondents’ homes and conducted in either one or two settings. A focused interview technique combined both open-ended and structured questioning, and some standard instruments. This technique, developed by Merton, Fiske, and Kendall (1956), permits hypotheses and research questions to be generated from specific situations. Interviews elicit data on the respondents’ reported behaviors, their interpretations of their own behaviors and those of family members, and their evaluations and expectations of family relations. Such a technique under skilled interviewers can produce in-depth understanding of the social and cultural contexts of family life. This technique is not as open-ended as ethnographic approaches or as those that elicit reminiscences, because interviewers play a more active and informed role in guiding the discussion.

Interviewers follow the conventions of ordinary social interactions, so respondents, if they so choose, can determine the course of the discussion. For example, if a respondent, in answering questions on one family relationship, switches to a related topic, the interviewer turns to those questions. Consequently, the flow of the discussion is not interrupted. If a respondent digresses too lengthily, however, he or she is redirected back to the interview questions. Verbatim notes were taken and later transcribed.

Data Analysis

Approximately halfway through each wave of interviewing, a code book is designed to analyze and categorize open-ended responses and transfer the structured responses to code sheets. Two members of the research staff code the interviews, and the differences are resolved, so their agreement each time is above 80%.

This coding process has four purposes. First, it converts responses to open-ended questions into measurable variables for statistical testing. Second, it establishes global 5-point measures that evaluate responses to various questions. For example, a global measure on family integration evaluates the frequency of contact in conjunction with the expressive and instrumental content in relationships. Third, coded measures identify extremes on a normal curve that are singled out for later case studies. Fourth, coding facilitates the identification of analytic categories stemming directly from the data rather than from preconceived categories imposed by the researcher.

In addition to coding for the above purposes, the qualitative
data need to be reduced to more abstract categories that will provide an interpretive framework. This productive although time-consuming process is used to analyze the respondents’ discussions about how respondents define, evaluate, and interpret their family relationships. To identify such patterns, the data are decontextualized by disassembling the interviews and filing together all discussions of this aspect of social relationships. Here coders singled out, listed, and then categorized the open-ended comments about fictive kin. These lists of comments are further condensed as categories are identified that indicate consistent patterns. Once patterns are identified and categorized, such as the types of fictive kin relationships, the data are recon- textualized by referring back to the entire interview. These patterns and categories are then examined within the context of other factors in that individual’s life.

The Creation of Fictive Kin

When questioning Black respondents about their families, interviewers asked, “Do you have others that are not conventionally defined as being related that you consider relatives? Is he or she like a real relative to you?” Forty-five percent reported they had such a relative. An additional 8% expanded the numbers of close kin by upgrading distant relatives to the status of primary kin. Of the 53% who expanded their kin group by these processes, over half were in at least weekly contact with them, and 80% described positive expressive benefits from the relationships. Women were significantly more likely to have fictive kin than men.

In Table 1, t tests comparing those with fictive kin and those without indicate that those with fictive kin are more likely to be active in church, unmarried, and childless. Thus, a principle of substitution operates to some extent, where those without immediate family fill the void by constructing kin-like relationships. The t tests also indicate that those who have fictive kin were significantly more socially integrated into active friendship networks. They also had better relationships with relatives, and more involvements in associations, particularly through their church. The cause and effect are difficult to discern, but as the following indicates, fictive kin relationships are most likely to be formed in a community context such as a church. Thus stay-at-homes would be less likely to have fictive kin. Likewise, Black men have fewer fictive kin than women do, and they are also less involved in church activities. Consequently, those who are more active in the community are more likely to also have expansive kinship networks.

Characteristics of Fictive Kin Relationships

These statistics indicate that the presence of play children is more likely to be found among those who have no children or have no children in the vicinity. Those with large families and numerous children and grandchildren usually do not have play children. One respondent commented, “I’ve got so many real children, I don’t know where I’d put play children.” Among those with fictive kin, the duration and strength of the relationships varies. For example, a childless woman referred to the young woman who lived with her. “Nettie is my niece.” Later in the interview, she said, “She’s not really my niece. She has lived with me for 20 years, and she’s just like a niece. Some people think we are mother and daughter. I don’t correct them. I also have a play son, the son of a friend.” At the next interview 14 months later, this respondent reported that Nettie had moved to her own apartment, but she declined to talk about it except to say they had had a falling out.

The most common forms of fictive kin are those that function along generational lines and parallel the parent–child relationship. In our sample of oldest old, the initiative for the formation of the relationship most often comes from the younger generation, particularly in the church context. Black churches are based on a family model using kinship terms of address and performing social supports (Ellison, 1997). A young woman may approach an older woman and ask if she can be her play daughter. Then she may give a token gift such as food to her new play mother or perform a service for her. When older women are identified as church mothers, they sit in special pews. Within that status, they usually accumulate several play daughters. Respondents describe their special feelings toward their fictive kin. “She is like a daughter but not a real daughter. She is more like an adopted daughter,” or “She is someone I take to my bosom.” When asked about fictive kin, a few commented, “No, I don’t have anyone I have those special feelings for.”

Some church mothers or play mothers incorporate the disciplinary functions of the parent role. Mrs. J is a popular church mother whose three church daughters are her primary source of support. They buy her clothes, take her out to dinner, and chauffeur her around. She insists she is not a "play mother" but instead is a "spiritual mother." “I brought them up very strict in the church.” She then added another parental role, “I married them off to good men.”

When these relationships are formed at church, they vary in outcomes. Some respondents interact with their play relatives only at church, such as a recently widowed man who inherited his late wife’s play daughter. “She calls me Daddy when I see her at church. She doesn’t visit me though.” In great contrast,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>No Fictive Kin</th>
<th>Fictive Kin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Religiosity</td>
<td>1.7 1.1</td>
<td>1.3 0.7*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Married</td>
<td>0.5 0.5</td>
<td>0.7 0.6***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Children</td>
<td>1.8 0.2</td>
<td>1.0 1.6**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children in proximity</td>
<td>1.1 1.6</td>
<td>0.6 1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandchildren</td>
<td>0.5 6.5</td>
<td>0.3 2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportive Children</td>
<td>1.5 0.8</td>
<td>2.1 0.9***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportive Grandchildren</td>
<td>2.2 0.9</td>
<td>2.4 0.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Supportive Relatives</td>
<td>2.4 0.9</td>
<td>2.3 0.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Weekly or More Contacts With</td>
<td>2.5 1.6</td>
<td>1.9 1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>2.2 2.7</td>
<td>2.7 1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other relatives</td>
<td>4.3 2.0</td>
<td>5.2 2.3***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>3.1 2.0</td>
<td>4.2 1.5***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p ≤ .05. **p ≤ .01. ***p ≤ .001.
one woman described her acquisition of play daughters. “The new minister looked at me and said, ‘You look like a born mother—you sit right here in the front row.’ Before I know it, I had two play daughters. They bring me food and drive me to church.” In a few cases, these fictive parent–child bonds were referred to as Godparent/Godchild relationships. For example, a retired minister and his wife were childless. When a neighbor died, her son came to them and asked them to be his Godparents. Over the years, their relationship became family-like and was extended to their Godson’s children whom the Godparents helped financially with their college education.

Stepchildren are commonly identified as one’s children if they are in frequent contact. One childless woman described such relationships. “I was married three times, but never had children. My stepchildren live all over the country. I travel around to see them, because I consider them my children.” In some cases, former daughters-in-law take on a caregiving role for their former mothers-in-law long after their marriages ended. “I couldn’t do without my daughter-in-law. When I broke my hip, she moved in and took care of everything.”

Some play mothers formed relationships with friends of their children. In their childhood, these mothers welcomed them into their homes, gave them snacks or meals. Eventually these play children began calling them “Mom,” a term of address that often persisted into adulthood.

Others had been surrogate parents to children at some point in their childhood. Mrs. A discussed a young man she had raised from the age of 7 months to 8 years old, when he went back to his mother. “His mother was paying me to care for him all that time. He was a very nice boy. He called me Nana. I raised him the same as we were raised. I teach everything that was right and the things that was wrong. Now he’s 24 and he drops by to see me. When I meet him on the street, he calls me Grandmother.”

Fosterage is a less commonly used term to refer to these relationships. The terms foster parent and foster child specifically refer to the roles that are publicly financed, temporary arrangements. These children do not usually become play children or adopted children. Exceptions include one woman who had 58 foster children over the years, but only one became a play child. “He’s the only one I call son. He comes by every Friday to see me.” A second foster mother resided with her husband, her grandsons, and two adopted daughters. These daughters had been her foster daughters who came from troubled homes.

**Upgrading Kinship Relationships**

This process entails redefining a more distant kin as a primary relative. First, the most common process is to redefine a collateral relative as a lineal kin. “My grandkids are really my niece’s children.” “My daughter is really my sister’s daughter.” Second, another process redefines an in-law as a blood relative. “After my sister died, my brother-in-law became my brother.” “My husband and I raised his brother’s children. The ones that still live around here I call my own. One nephew treats me like a mother. He comes when I call him.”

**The Range of Fictive Kin Relationships**

In terms of “native talk,” the Blacks in the San Francisco Bay Area do not use the term “fictive” kin and rarely refer to these relationships as “chosen kin”; they most commonly refer to such relationships as “play” relatives. The characteristics of fictive kin relationships range from casual relationships, such as an occasional encounter at church, where they address each other by a kin term, to genuine family-like relationships.

“They are my family.” —Family relationships are characterized by diffuse enduring solidarity. Following Schneider’s definition, the relationship has “Solidarity because the relationship is supportive, helpful and cooperative; it rests upon trust and the other can be trusted. Diffuse because it is not narrowly defined to a specific goal or specific kind of behavior” (1968, p. 52). Following a rule of incorporation, nonkin relationships having these characteristics are commonly defined as part of one’s family. For example, if a woman raises children for some length of time, she declares them as her own. “If I raise them, they are mine.”

Some play children take on such a status, or even a boarder may join the family. Some take in a younger person, who is having emotional or family difficulties, and function as a parent. “The girl that lives with me, I take as my daughter. Her own mother is on drugs, so I take care of her four-year-old son.” Later when discussing her deceased son, she mentioned in passing that he was the father of the boy she is taking care of, as if inferring that her relationship with her informally adopted daughter, not her son’s paternity, was the basis of the arrangement.

“They are like my family.” —Using a rule of equivalence, some relationships are “like family, but not quite family.” One woman referred to a neighbor as “like family” because they had “a touchable friendship.” Others are like family, because they share problems and feelings with each other. A friendly chore worker or the woman who brings her “Meals on Wheels” can be considered like family. Moreover, some respondents may replace biological relationships with those that are less problematic. “My daughter’s kids didn’t make much of themselves. I kicked them out, and adopted a grandson. When I see him, he hugs me and calls me ‘Grandma.’” Play daughters at church can become like family if they share holiday celebrations. One woman reported her play daughters at church argue with her own granddaughter about who can have her for dinner on holidays. They settled this dispute by having her rotate between households. Relationships also can be defined differently over the life course. “Mother Hale is my only family. I think of her as my sister. I raised her after her mother died. Now she is my best friend.”

“She is my daughter, because she helps me.” —The concept of being helped can also be a defining element of a fictive kin relationship. A young woman becomes a play daughter, because she brings food to her play mother and takes her places. In fact, when asked about such relationships, one woman respondent said, “No I don’t have anyone who helps me like that.” Instead the usual response was, “My stepdaughter helps me, so I call her my daughter.” “A neighbor treats me like her father. I call her ‘daughter’ when she comes to help.” Respondents evaluated their play relationships by the functions performed. One woman commented, “I raised three children many years ago. They were my brother’s daughters. They are all married with families of their own. I consider their children to be my grandchildren if they come around to see me.” When a fictive relative is confined only to those who help or who visit,
these relationships do not usually survive geographic mobility. “I had a play daughter, but we lost contact when I moved here.” “I have a play son in Texas, but I haven’t heard from him since he took sick.”

“Some call me Mom at church.”—These are context-specific relationships that entail using kinship terminology as a term of address in a superficial conversation. “When I see her at church, she says, ‘How you doing, Mom.’ ”Some play daughters do not visit but call now and then to see how their play mother is.

“My friends are my chosen family” or “Everyone at church is my family.”—In treating relationships generically, no one is singled out by their personal characteristics or any special features of the relationship. Most likely these group-based connections are most unlike family relationships.

Conclusions

In summary, a number of explanations for the flexible expansion of the Black American family have been discussed here. One longstanding conjecture points to historical roots in West Africa among groups that emphasized consanguine ties at the expense of the marriage relationship (Sudarkasa, 1988). By emphasizing collateral relationships and the solidarity of siblings, as these West African cultures did, a parent’s sibling is usually viewed as closer, and that sibling’s relatives are also closer than when that principle is absent. Thus, the kinship network is likely to be large and supportive. Because the stability of the family does not rest on the stability of marriage, moreover, this group is potentially stable over time.

In addition, fictive kinship ties are believed to precede slavery. Gutman (1976) points out that West African cultures, like many cross-culturally, are dominated by kinship bonds while friendship relationships are rare. Consequently, when nonkin are also present, they tend to be incorporated into the social world of a kinship group either informally or through rituals such as blood brotherhood. In slavery, the creation of kin-like relationships were adaptive, particularly for children who were formally or informally adopted when parents died or were sold. Children were taught to address unrelated adult slaves as “Aunt” or “Uncle,” which socialized them into an enlarged family-like slave community.

In the research reported here, the boundaries around the families of very old Blacks are generally defined flexibly and tend to be inclusive of distant relatives and even close friends. For example, respondents not only identified biological children but also included selected children whom they had raised or any young person who performed filial duties. In Black families also, strong norms of responsibility extend to both close and distant relatives that espouse the mandate that one helps not just parents and children but also members of the extended family. Multiple relatives can respond to the needs of older members and adapt quickly to difficult circumstances (Aschenbrenner, 1973; Martin & Martin, 1978). Consequently the Black extended family has a stronger capacity to respond to the needs of older members because of the collective actions of relatives. In recent years, however, such a capacity seems to be declining among younger Black single mothers, a change that has been traced to the lack of resources to help others (Hogan et al., 1993).

In contrast, comparisons between White and Black oldest old indicate that Blacks are significantly more integrated into extended family life. First, this difference can be traced to the fact that relationships with collateral relatives, nieces, nephews, and cousins are far more central to the lives of the Blacks. Because high proportions in both groups are childless, large numbers are without a primary supporter or caregiver. Thus, when these very old people need a caregiver, the outcomes for Blacks and Whites are quite different. Almost half of the Black childless could call on nieces and nephews or other collateral kin to help them, a proportion twice as high as among their White counterparts (Johnson & Barer, 1995).

A second process of extended family expansion was through the creation of fictive kin. This process was observed among almost half the respondents, and 58% had at least weekly contact with fictive kin. Although these relationships ranged in functions from truly close family relationships to merely using a kinship term of address, fictive kin were described affectionately and particularly enriched the lives of those who had few family resources.

A third process indicated that still others upgraded secondary relationships to the status of primary relationships, a pattern that compensated for losses through death. Thus, when a sibling dies, the surviving spouse may assume the role of brother, or a niece who helps an older relative becomes a daughter.

The study of fictive kin is particularly relevant in evaluating at least three contemporary family changes. First, the use of personal choices to expand family boundaries is adaptive in meeting the needs of older people. With the extension of the life span, but with little decline in morbidity rates, more individuals are outliving their helping networks. In our research on the oldest old, more than one fourth of both the Black and White sample no longer maintained face-to-face primary family relationships. In great contrast by race, however, there were few isolates among the Blacks, largely because of their capacity to upgrade their distant kin to primary kin and to create fictive kin as substitutes.

Second, demographic trends indicate that many Americans are rejecting the nuclear family because of sexual preferences, unwed motherhood, or a variety of personal preferences. The “chosen kin” who are part of these alternative social forms may lessen the vulnerabilities these alternative family forms potentially entail. When the Black family is studied in the wider socioeconomic, religious, and community contexts, the advantages of such a flexible family system are clearly apparent (Billingsly, 1992).

Third, the processes of selecting kin among older Blacks are similar to the processes of family and kinship reorganizational processes after marital changes (Johnson & Barer, 1987). In both settings, new kinship terminologies and definitions of relationships on the basis of personal choices stem from affection as well as immediate needs. The resulting system of relationships is also increasingly used in alternative family forms in which the criteria for family membership are not based solely on blood and marriage. Such broad and flexible definitions of family and kinship among Blacks most likely will become increasingly applicable to the changing contemporary family.

McAdoo (1998) suggested that researchers on the Black family need to focus, not on family problems per se, but on those families who are resilient in overcoming hurdles in their environment and those who are not. She also suggested that we
need to expand our conceptualization of the Black family to include more diverse family groupings. Certainly the further study of areas such as fictive kinship and the more general capacity to redefine family membership is one such area that needs more research. Likewise, the study of a wider age span also can lead to productive insights.

This study was confined to those 85 years and older, an age group with high rates of disability and social losses as well as physical losses. Consistent with the literature on the family life of older Black Americans, these findings indicate they are well integrated into family activities. When in need of help, virtually everyone has someone to call on. These findings agree with the conventional measures in terms of frequency of contact and support, but the behavioral indicators evaluate only limited dimensions of relationships. The research design used here also included open-ended interviewing that encouraged respondents to discuss the qualities of these fictive kin relationships and the more subtle forms of support they provide. Because of the wide differentiation in these relationships, however, we have less knowledge of the limits entailed in what fictive kin do for older people. Such information needs to be collected in future research with a wider age group to add to our knowledge of the varied adaptive processes that shape family resources.

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